

Dyess Spouse Employment Study

Research Methods PADM 753

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I. Executive Summary

In partnership with Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, the Air Combat Command (ACC) Family Programs Branch conducted research focused on military spouses' challenges when seeking employment. Finding a job can be a great challenge if you move every few years. The lack of employment opportunities can be an economic and morale issue for service members and their spouses. According to Family Policy officials, spouses cite employment as a major concern.¹ This concern has the potential to negatively impact retention rates. The military member whose financial picture is affected because their spouse cannot obtain gainful employment may make the decision to retire early if they feel it is in the best interest of the family. This concern has the potential to negatively impact retention rates. The military member whose financial picture is affected because their spouse cannot obtain gainful employment may make the decision to retire early if they feel it is in the best interests of the family.

Dyess Air Force Base in Abilene, Texas was selected as the focal point of the research because of its size in relation to the surrounding civilian community. Dyess is a major contributor to the Abilene economy, with employment of 5,400 active duty and DoD civilians.² Abilene is a young community with a median age of 32.6 years with a total population of 114,900 and growing.³ Abilene is at the center of a 22-county trade area serving 322,500 people. Its website proudly displays facts about the city's commitment to economic development and incentive programs designed to promote the

¹ "Helping Spouses Find Jobs." Air Force News. July 1996.

² "Abilene." Community Profile, 1999.

³ "Abilene Industrial Foundation." Online, www.abilene.com/aif. February 2000.

success and continued growth of its industrial base and business community. Attracting new enterprise and developing existing business is a very important goal.

Fourteen military spouses located at Dyess participated in this research project. They were divided into three groups with each group addressing the same set of key research questions. The spouses were encouraged to talk about their challenges in seeking employment, career goals, and accomplishments. All collected data was analyzed and sorted to identify common themes. Possible solutions are offered with hopes to 1) improve job opportunities for military spouses, 2) lessen the impact for spouses seeking employment in remote locations, 3) enlist the support of the surrounding community to employ more military spouses, and 4) seek ways to market the skills and talents of the military spouses to both military and non-military communities. Furthermore, in order to gain an appreciation for the scope of this problem beyond Dyess AFB, Career Focus Program (CFP) managers at four different Air Force installations were consulted. They were extremely helpful and provided valuable insight and several suggestions for the Dyess community.

There are many demands inherent in military service requiring flexibility on behalf of the non-military spouse. A dual-income military couple is one in which the non-military spouse is employed. As a family, they are faced with military service decisions that sometimes affect the career progression of one or both spouses, their economic stability, and in some cases, emotional stability.

II. Introduction/Purpose

The purpose of this research is to identify challenges and barriers experienced by spouses of military personnel while seeking employment at and around Dyess AFB,

particularly for those spouses pursuing professional careers. Additionally, this research will outline some of the steps taken by Air Force installations located near small to mid-sized communities similar to Dyess AFB. This research is important because military spouses desire employment and most often seek employment to meet the basic economic needs of their families. If these needs are not met, the standard of living for military families is lowered which has the potential to negatively impact retention.⁴ Spouses of military members are often faced with making a choice between career and family.

Military spouses with professional careers are disadvantaged in advancing up the career ladder because of their spouses' frequent and unpredictable relocation assignments. When they choose to travel with their spouses to keep the family unit together, they forfeit seniority and other accrued benefits, including retirement benefits. According to the National Military Family Association (NMFA), a nonprofit organization representing the families of the uniformed services, active reserve and retired service members, in 1995, 62% of military spouses stated their income was necessary in order to make ends meet and pay basic family expenses; however, 47% of the military spouses who work earn no more than \$5,000 per year.⁵ Furthermore, in 1995, the unemployment rate for military spouses was four times that of civilian spouses—16% versus 4%. Are military spouses forced to accept low paying jobs or part-time jobs that do not utilize their skills and/or experience? If so, why? More importantly, what can be done to increase employment opportunities for spouses and to match them with jobs more suited to their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

⁴ "Spousal Employment." National Military Family Association, August 1996

⁵ "Spousal Employment." National Military Family Association, August 1996

III. Background

After identifying Dyess AFB as the model location to conduct this research, it was decided focus group interviews would be the best method for gathering data. Focus groups have provided researchers with valuable insights into conducting complicated investigations where opinions or attitudes are conditional or where the area of concern relates to different behaviors or motivations.⁶ It was important for the participants to come from diverse backgrounds with different career paths, but with similar characteristics such as spouses of military personnel who at some point in time were job seekers or who were currently pursuing job opportunities. Although characterized by similarity, the focus groups had sufficient variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions.

The target audience was selected by extending an invitation to spouses with professional careers to attend a meeting sponsored by the Family Programs Branch from ACC Headquarters and a representative from the Dyess Family Support Center. The fourteen participants were divided into three focus groups. The goals of the study were explained and each group was asked the same key questions as identified in the attached Appendix.

The demographic characteristics of the groups as a whole are:

- 50% Officers, 50% Enlisted
- 37 was the average age
- 7% Male, 93% Females
- 72% Caucasian, 14% African American, 7% Latin, 7% Other
- 14% had 2 years college

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- 29% held a Bachelor Degree, 50% held a Master Degree
 - 7% held a Ph.D.

Using the round-robin method, participants introduced themselves and stated facts such as how long they have resided in Abilene, where they relocated from, and their favorite hobby. At the end of each group session, the main points were summarized and validated. Participants were given an opportunity to amend, correct or add to the final summary.

IV. Discussion

The majority of the spouses indicated they were supportive of their partner's military career; however, they felt support for spouses seeking employment needed to be improved in Abilene. They feel the community is close knit which makes it difficult for newcomers. It helps to know someone already in the job market to get inside. Without knowing someone, spouses are dependent on other sources of information such as the Family Support Center, base paper, local newspaper, key spouse programs, bulletin boards, and the Internet. Participants expressed subtle cultural differences they experienced while seeking employment in the Abilene area. The work environment appeared very casual; often times interviewing spouses felt they were overdressed. For example, one participant's experience while visiting the state employment commission left her with a feeling of being overdressed because she was invited to exit the building using the back door to avoid passing through the casually-dressed visitors in the lobby.

The experiences and perceptions of the participants were analyzed for common themes. In addition to the obvious, being relocated every few years, the following issues were discussed:

⁶ Krueger, Richard A. Focus Groups. Sage Publications, Inc. 1994, p. 44.

Local universities require employees to sign a statement of religious faith as part of the hiring process. One of the participants with a Ph.D. in counseling and education interviewed with two of the three local universities and was not offered employment. One interviewer admitted to inviting the participant to the interview only to “meet her.” She changed her mind about applying for a job at one of the schools because the school’s policy required every applicant to sign a religious faith statement “... I didn’t want to do this so I didn’t apply at this school.” At another interview she was told that the committee decided against hiring her because she had indicated she would be there for one year. She felt if she hadn’t stated how long she planned to be in the area that she would have gotten the job; however, she wanted to be open and up front with the hiring committee because she felt it was the right thing to do. She suspects there are some people who lie about their military affiliation to get the job.

Limited information on civil service employment. Participants felt there was a lack of information available on civil service positions and that the hiring practices were confusing. Some indicated they found the job kit provided by the Civilian Personnel Operations too intimidating.

Employers discriminate against military spouses. Some employers have stated their reason for not hiring a military spouse is because it would be cost prohibitive. They didn’t want to train someone and then possibly lose them in a couple of years due to a relocation assignment. Spouses have a difficult time competing for employment once their military affiliation is known.

Obtaining State certifications and licensing can be time consuming and very costly. Spouses are frustrated with new certification requirements at every duty location.

They wish the governing state would accept and recognize national certifications or certifications from other states instead of requiring a new comer to obtain certification for their state. The costs of certification can be very high; it varies depending on your area of expertise. Of course, for a family who has already lost a portion of their income due to a relocation assignment and the spouse's lack of job opportunities in the new area, paying for Texas certification is an unwelcomed expense. Also, they run the risk of bearing the expense of acquiring Texas certification and not securing a job to utilize their skills.

Psychological implications of unemployment. Military life has its own stresses; spouses are expected to maintain the household while the military member is deployed. Unemployment challenges for the spouse only compounds the stress. It's difficult for a spouse to find a job that offers enough flexibility in the work schedule to make juggling work and family easy. It appears that the spouses with easily transferable career fields, such as educators and medical professionals, were better able to adapt to the military lifestyle. Those whose careers were planned before becoming a part of the military family felt degraded when offered employment in a "temporary" status or in a low grade administrative position. The perception is they feel pressured to take low paying jobs due to a lack of professional positions they qualify for, but are not available in the civil service system or surrounding communities.

Unemployment benefits are different state to state. According to the Texas Workforce Commission, the state provides unemployment benefits to spouses who have relocated to another state if Texas determines they are eligible.⁷ There is a possible "disqualification" waiting period of 6 to 25 weeks before an individual becomes eligible for unemployment compensation. When a military spouse relocates to Texas, Texas will

contact the state from which they relocated to determine the person's eligibility for unemployment benefits. Unemployment compensation eligibility is determined and paid, if applicable, by the state they relocated from. Most states, like Texas, also have a disqualification-waiting period which determines when benefits start.

Dyess and the local community appear to operate on a “good old boy” network.

The perception is you have to know someone to get the better paying and more desirable positions on base. A job offer on base would probably be a low-grade administrative type position. One participant managed to secure a position on base after trying for three years. She sites part of the reason/problem is that the Dyess CPO customer is serviced through AFPC at Randolph AFB. She said her name was left off many of the certificates for fill action. Similarly, spouses felt most employers promoted solely from within their organizations leaving mostly entry-level positions available. Downtown, many businesses were found to not accept resumes unless there were open positions advertised. Open positions seemed to be rarely advertised.

Entry-level Educators and Nursing Positions More Adaptable. (Peggy, I'm not sure why we are looking to change this heading. We refer to a lack of professional positions throughout this paper and we'll need to re-word accordingly if we go with this new version. I think our first choice is the way to go because this section is the recap of what was said versus our explaining why educators and medical types had more success.

Those in more mobile career fields, such as teaching and nursing seemed to do better at securing a position than others. The primary concern in seeking employment in these fields was the required state recertifications. Additionally, in the teaching career field, the best time of the year to apply for a position seems to be at the beginning or end of the

⁷ Texas Workforce Commission, Telephone interview with Misty Maston, February 24, 2000.

school year. One of the participants is currently employed as a kindergarten teacher. She said she was very fortunate to get a job in such a short amount of time. She felt timing and her credentials as a special education teacher made a difference. She and her spouse relocated to the area in April/May during the time schools were hiring for the next school season. The school hired her with the understanding that she would get Texas certification. Also different from other spouses, she is making more than she was in Florida. She is job sharing which allows the other kindergarten teacher to focus on starting his or her own business. She even received credit for previous teaching experience and entered the pay scale at the appropriate level. She did not feel discriminated against during the employment process and said the school principle is very happy with his decision to hire her.

Low salaries

Most of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the salaries offered in the Dyess AFB area, especially when compared to similar positions held at their previous assignments. Additionally, some spouses explained the salaries were too low to compensate for the prices associated with childcare and other day-to-day expenses. This concern also ties into the previous stated problem of fewer professional positions available in the Dyess area.

Racial discrimination. Throughout the course of the interviews, there was some perception of racial discrimination. One spouse in particular perceived racial discrimination when she applied for a position as secretary for a CEO. She was not offered the job and a short time later, the same company announced another opening for a secretarial position. When she didn't get a call from Human Resources as a possible

candidate for the job, she inquired to be told that she wasn't qualified for the position. She questioned how she was determined qualified to interview for the CEO secretary position and not determined qualified to interview for secretary's position in the general sense. Although, only a single instance of racial discrimination was mentioned, there were a few additional spouses who collaborated with similar occurrences involving other spouses not present during the interviews.

V. Findings

At the conclusion of the three focus group interviews, it was evident all spouses felt there were significant barriers to securing professional employment in the Abilene area. Many of the common themes, such as the "good old boy" network, lack of professional opportunities, and discrimination (race or gender) all appear to be perceptions either on the part of the spouses or the area employers. Additionally, after consulting with the Career Focus Program (CFP) managers at Cannon, Beale, Ellsworth and Minot AFBs, it is evident the challenges encountered at Dyess are equally prevalent at these four installations. The following paragraphs outline the major themes drawn from the focus groups on what the Dyess spouses encountered in their search for employment

One problem consistently voiced by the spouses was the fact all of the Abilene area universities are private parochial institutions. Classes are perceived to be more expensive than the average public university, therefore, military spouses are somewhat limited in their efforts to continue their education. According to figures posted on the Abilene Christian University website, the average Texas private college will cost \$15,768 per year, while the average Texas state-supported college is \$10,481.⁸ Also, some of the

⁸ "Abilene Christian University." Online, www.acu.edu/admissions/ugrad/yei/compare.html. February 25, 2000.

spouses felt their religious affiliation was a contributing factor in their difficulties with finding employment at these institutions because all universities required a signed statement of faith.

Almost all the spouses agreed salaries appeared to be far lower when compared to previous employment. This was damaging to military families for two primary reasons; first, the perceived lower salaries meant families were having a difficult time dealing with the costs of childcare. On base childcare fees are based upon total family income. Calls were made to area daycares and it was determined that the average cost of daycare for a two-year-old off base is \$77.55. For on base childcare, those with higher incomes are on the high end of the payment scale vs. those with lower incomes. This type of distribution allows some equity in childcare costs on base. The Dyess Child Development Center provided the following weekly childcare costs:

| <u>Income Level</u> | <u>Cost</u> |
|---------------------|-------------|
| \$0 - \$23,000 | \$53 |
| \$23,001 - \$34,000 | \$60 |
| \$34,001 - \$44,000 | \$74 |
| \$44,001 - \$55,000 | \$84 |
| \$55,001 - \$70,000 | \$97 |
| \$70,001+ | \$105 |

Second, there was a consistent feeling of personal and professional frustration. This was especially true for those who left lucrative positions while assigned to previous installations. In an effort to get a feel for the cost of living in Abilene, Texas, the cost of living comparator on Money Magazine's website was used for a comparison of Abilene's

salary of \$30,000 with annual salaries at several cities across the United States.⁹ The cities chosen below are in close proximity to Air Force installations. In all cases, Abilene's cost of living was shown to be lower:

| <u>EARNING \$30K PER YEAR IN:</u> | | <u>EQUIVALENT SALARY IN ABILENE, TX</u> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|---|
| Panama City, FL | Tyndall, AFB | \$25,945 |
| Sacramento, CA | Beale AFB | \$22,388 |
| Newport News, VA | Langley AFB | \$26,785 |
| Minot, ND | Minot AFB | \$27,854 |
| Clovis, NM | Cannon | \$28,967 |
| Rapid City, SD | Ellsworth | \$28,805 |

Additionally, many spouses felt more could be done on the part of Dyess AFB leadership and the Dyess CFP in order to improve military spouse employment, both on and off base. There were two common themes among the spouses. First, there appeared to be no advocate for military spousal employment in the local community, and second, there was limited support from the Dyess Central Personnel Office with the confusing and complicated civil service employment system. More specifically, there was frustration with referrals to both the Internet and phone numbers to the central personnel office at Randolph AFB, with limited local information on vacancies, and with the apparent lack of position openings beyond basic administrative and clerical work.

Furthermore, one common theme was the difficulty associated with meeting state licensure requirements—in this case the state of Texas. Many spouses cited valid concerns with the lack of a national certification process or possibly the acceptance of other state licensing programs. Although their argument has merit, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of the Dyess CFP and little can be done on the part of Abilene area employers.

⁹ "Money Magazine." Online, www.pathfinder.com/money/tools. February 25, 2000.

Finally, all of the common themes outlined above have impacted Dyess military families in several ways. It's no secret military careers are a barrier to spouses' careers. Due to frequent moves in the United States and overseas, spouses have to contend with diverse job markets and a lack of career progression, training opportunities and seniority. The mobile lifestyle makes it difficult to participate in long-term retirement plans and to earn vesting rights. Countless studies have illustrated the psychological pain of unemployment, especially in the military family, where the added income is often times needed in order to make ends meet. Unfortunately, these conditions can lead to marital problems, forced career decisions, and ultimately retention problems. These same issues were a consistent theme among all three focus groups.

III. Proposed Enhancements

In an effort to gain some insight into the prevalence of Dyess' problems at similarly "isolated" installations, indepth interviews were conducted with four CFP managers at Minot, Cannon, Beale and Ellsworth AFBs. All of these CFP managers readily identified the challenges and barriers prevalent in the Dyess community as similar to their own employment communities. Of particular significance, is the fact that all four Family Support Centers (FSC) were manned as such to afford dedicated CFP managers. These professionals are responsible for their respective CFP programs only, as opposed to managing additional programs as well. Fortunately, they have had some real success in overcoming these types of problems and common suggestions follow:

Successful Methods of Networking the Career Focus Program. All four CFP managers have participated in one or more community partnerships, civic or professional organizations, and charities in order to increase area employer awareness. Some areas,

such as the Beale AFB civilian community, have gone to great lengths to foster economic development in their area and, as a result, offer a wider variety of community organizations to participate in. Regardless, these CFP managers agreed much of the bias associated with military spouses is reduced through active participation and dialogue within these organizations. Most suggested the importance of making spouses part of the networking process as well. Making contacts, meeting human resource managers, frequent follow-ups, etc., are examples of spousal networking. Additionally, all CFP managers spoke of many success stories associated with their Job Banks. In some cases, individuals listed in their job bank were given priority referrals on unadvertised jobs as a direct result of the rapport established between the CFP manager and the human resource managers within the local community. In addition to the Job Bank, some of the CFP managers had access to state employment opportunities and provided the materials and information needed to apply for state employment. While few of the CFP managers had a process in place for following up with the spouse and/or the employer. Such a system could possibly enable the CFP to better target its programs and allow for customer (both the employer and the military spouse) feedback, success rate/measurement, etc. Finally, none of the programs had a mentoring system in place. However, the CFP manager at Beale AFB outlined plans to initiate a professional network of military spouses in order to better assist inbound spouses with their employment needs. Such a vehicle could serve as another means of promoting support for hiring military spouses.

Sample organizations:

- Member or possibly a committee chair on local Chamber of Commerce
- Member of local Employer Advisory Council

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- Local Habitat for Humanity Board member—good for base publicity
 - Member of Local County Job Developers Organization
 - Member of area Job Fair Committee
 - Member of Base Community Council
 - Member of local Economic Development Committee

Successful resources and programs offered through the Family Support Center/Career Focus Program. Most CFP managers agreed that one-on-one counseling was very important. “The key to a successful program is to take time to know your customers, and assist them as much as possible with their job search skills and job leads.” --CFP Manager, Beale AFB. This includes assessment of the spouse’s self-awareness (personality characteristics/interests/values/skills/barriers), their individual employment and educational goals, furthering their job search skills, analysis of self-confidence, and ensuring they are maintaining a positive attitude and realistic expectations. In addition to personal attention, several resources are available at some of the FSCs, such as a dedicated resource room with staff, library, computer resources, and up-to-date information on the local economy--one manager arranges weekly visits with the Department of Labor! Furthermore, knowledgeable staff is on-hand to assist spouses with the Civilian Personnel Office Job Kit and they maintain current job listings.

In addition to adequate resources, many successful programs are offered through the CFPs/FSCs at the four installations. Following are examples:

1. “Seeds for Growth”--This workshop is comprised of several mini-workshops designed to afford military spouses an opportunity to engage in introspection. The workshop encourages military spouses to explore personality-temperament and

preferences, vocational interest, values clarification and goals setting; provides attendees with tools for improving cross-gender communications; and illustrates options for personal and career growth. The length of the program is three days (16 hours).

2. State Employment Workshop--This workshop is designed to inform participants of the State of California hiring process. The workshop addresses the following topics: interpreting the exam bulletin, completing the state application, writing a resume for state employment, tips for state interviews, and preparing for examinations.

3. “Be Your Own Boss”--This Small Business Workshop provides participants with information on how to lay the foundation for a successful small business. The Small Business Development Center provides an instructor for the workshop. In addition, “Take Care of Yourself” is part of the Small Business Workshop. As such, the Personal Financial Program Manager introduces personal aspects of financing a business, such as instruction on investing, saving, retirement, researching startup and maintenance money, and personal smart money tips.

4. Interviewing with Confidence, Resume Writing and Negotiation--These workshops inform spouses and family members of the variables affecting proper job interviewing skills; the proper way to assemble a marketable resume; and how to negotiate for salary and benefits during the hiring process. These programs are generally offered based upon the needs of the military spouses.

5. Various Hands-on Training Workshops--Most bases offered some sort of technical or specialty training, either through the Base Education Center or in-house with local providers. Some examples range from the Computer Training Programs offered at

all four bases, to the Certified Nursing Assistant Training program offered at Cannon AFB.

6. Successful Methods of Marketing the Career Focus Program--Finally, all of the CFP managers were very helpful in illustrating examples of how they advertise their CFPs, job openings, upcoming training and workshops to their respective military families. The following are common examples:

- Quarterly FSC Program
- On-base and off-base newspapers
- Family Service Welcome Program/Right Start orientations
- Base TV station/Commander's channel
- Chamber of Commerce functions
- Employer visitations
- Employer direct calls
- Flyers advertising hot jobs placed in the base housing areas, Shopette, and other public bulletin boards
- FSC staff member referrals and giving customers information on the CFP
- E-mail bulletins sent throughout the base computer network
- FSC/base web page
- Sponsor packages

VI. Conclusion

The findings indicate that working military spouses relocating to Dyess will most likely experience a setback in their career progression due to lower salaries, Texas state licensure requirements, higher education expenses, and limited job opportunities. It is further evident that Dyess and its surrounding communities could benefit from a proposed job bank of military spouses that would help lessen the impact on spouses seeking employment at Dyess. In order to ensure success for a job bank, it is suggested that the CFP manager and human resource managers within the surrounding

communities form a networking relationship to foster active participation and dialogue within these organizations. There is a need to increase employer awareness of the knowledge, skills and abilities of military spouses seeking employment in the Dyess and area communities.

APPENDIX

Key Questions:

1. Which participants are currently working or have been employed in the Dyess community.
2. What has your job hunting experience been like at Dyess?
3. What were some of the barriers and/or challenges in your job search?
4. What kind of support system did you have to assist in your job search?
5. What advice would you provide to other spouses coming to Dyess that want to work while they are here?
6. What can the AF/Dyess do about these challenges/barriers?
7. How can employed spouses in the community help incoming spouses?
8. What is your first source of information about the base & the local community?
9. How do you get your information about FSC events?
10. Does your spouse talk about what the FSC has to offer?